

## THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF WINSTANLEY'S WRITINGS – Andrew Bradstock

Winstanley's treatise *The New Law of Righteousnes*, published only weeks before he began to dig on St George's Hill, is the first of his writings to mention his proposed course of action. 'As I was in a trance not long since', Winstanley explains, 'I heard these words, Worke together. Eat bread together; declare this all abroad.'<sup>1</sup> It was a 'command of the Spirit' requiring a response by speech, writing and action; and having already spoken and written, he now needed the Lord to show him the 'place and manner, how he wil have us that are called common people, to manure and work upon the common Lands', in order that he could declare his vision by action.<sup>2</sup>

However we interpret Winstanley's 'trance', he himself was in no doubt that the Spirit still communicated with men and women, as in Biblical times. In an earlier work, *The Saints Paradice*, he spoke of God speaking 'inwardly' to men and women 'by voice, vision, dream, or revelation.'<sup>3</sup> In *Truth Lifting up his head above Scandals*, probably published between *The Saints Paradice* and *The New Law of Righteousnes*, Winstanley takes his intended readers – the scholars of Oxford and Cambridge – to task for suggesting that 'visions and revelations are ceased'.<sup>4</sup> For Winstanley the Spirit not only speaks to women and men but indwells them: 'this Spirit of Reason' (Reason being his preferred name for God) 'is not without a man, but within every

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<sup>1</sup> Gerrard Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes* (1649) in Thomas N. Corns, Ann Hughes, and David Loewenstein, eds, *The Complete Works of Gerrard Winstanley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) (hereafter CW), I, 513.

<sup>2</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 517.

<sup>3</sup> Winstanley, *The Saints Paradice* (1648), CW, I, 354.

<sup>4</sup> Winstanley, *Truth Lifting up his head above Scandals* (1648), CW, I, 410.

man, to tell him, or teach him, for this spirit is his maker, he dwells in him.’<sup>5</sup> The person who has the Spirit within them finds they have no need to seek instruction from other humans, for the Spirit teaches them ‘all things’.<sup>6</sup> This includes how to interpret the Scriptures, for, since the original writers wrote ‘from experience, and teachings of the Father’, and not what they imagined or were told by others, so

we are taught thereby to waite upon the Father with a meek and obedient spirit, till he teach us, and feed us with sincere milk, as he taught them, that wrote these Scriptures.<sup>7</sup>

A conviction that every man and woman should be indwelt by the Spirit was central to Winstanley’s theology. As he affirms in the opening lines of *The New Law of Righteousnes*,

There is nothing more sweet and satisfactory to a man, then this: to know and feel that spirituall power of righteousnesse to rule in him, which he cals God. For while the flesh through hasty and violent lusts, doth rebell against the spirit, it hath no true peace, but is still pulling misery upon himself. But when the created flesh is made subject to the law of righteousnesse, and walks uprightly in the Creation, in the light of that spirit, then it lies down in rest.<sup>8</sup>

Sweet and satisfactory though it may be to experience the ‘new law of righteousness’, this can only occur once the desires of the flesh are overcome by the power of the Spirit. Winstanley discerned there to be two powers within each person struggling for supremacy over his or her will: the power of ‘flesh’, a ‘particular,

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<sup>5</sup> Winstanley, *The Saints Paradise*, CW, I, 375.

<sup>6</sup> Winstanley, *The Saints Paradise*, CW, I, 314.

<sup>7</sup> Winstanley, *Truth Lifting up his head*, CW, I, 435; cf. CW, II, 200.

<sup>8</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 478.

confining, selfish power, which is the Devil'; and the 'universall spreading power, that delights in the liberty of the whole Creation, which is Christ in you.' And the 'chiefest knowledge' of a person is to be able to distinguish between 'these two powers which strives for government in him'.<sup>9</sup>

In an extended discussion in *The New Law of Righteousnes*, which builds upon passages in his earlier writings, Winstanley expounds this teaching using the metaphor of 'two Adams'. Drawing upon St Paul's argument in Romans 5.19 that 'by one man's disobedience many were many sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous', Winstanley shows how the 'first Adam' manifests himself when pride triumphs over humility, 'covetousness over contentednesse, envy over love, lust before chastity' and so on; and how, when 'Christ the spirit of truth' arises, then 'humility rises above pride, love above envy, a meek and quiet spirit above hasty rash anger, chastity above unclean lusts, and light above darknesse.'<sup>10</sup> In keeping with his conviction that the Bible should be 'experienced' and not read purely as an account of past events, Winstanley sees Adam both as a figure who once lived upon earth and who also is to be seen 'every day walking up and down the street' in the form of those who live 'upon the objects of the creation, and not in and upon that spirit that made the creation.' The first Adam delights in possessing created objects, the second upon the 'mighty power that made the creation'. And these two powers are at war in every creature.<sup>11</sup>

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Winstanley laid much stress on the need for individual transformation: he himself had experienced the second Adam, Christ, making his body 'the kingdom', or 'a new

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<sup>9</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 495-6.

<sup>10</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 496.

<sup>11</sup> Winstanley, *Truth Lifting up his head*, CW, I, 427.

heaven, and a new earth, wherein dwells Righteousness',<sup>12</sup> and the need for all to know that for themselves was at the heart of his message. Yet this change was not an end in itself, but also had profound social and economic consequences: for Winstanley wants to affirm, with equal force, that the way the world is ordered, particularly insofar as the land is treated as private property and kept from the poor by rich landlords, is an outworking of the covetousness and greed characterised by those in whom the first Adam holds sway. Just as individuals are subject to both Adams, struggling for power within them, so within society one finds a tension between the rule of Adam and the rule of Christ.

Demonstrating a remarkable degree of coherence, Winstanley argues that both at the individual and the 'structural' level, the rule of Christ must overcome the rule of Adam in order for all to enjoy true freedom and peace and justice to reign. While the 'man of flesh' considers it right that some should be rich, however they got their wealth, and rule over the poor and make them their slaves,

the spiritual man, which is Christ, doth judge according to the light of equity and reason, That al man-kinde ought to have a quiet substance and freedome, to live upon the earth; and that there shal be no bond-man nor begger in all his holy mountain.<sup>13</sup>

The creation narrative in Genesis chapter 1 makes it clear that people were not made to live under bondage but under freedom, Winstanley asserts. The present system, which allows some to be oppressing tyrants and others to live in poverty, thus dishonours the Maker; but although

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<sup>12</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 496-7

<sup>13</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 502.

the powers and wisdom of the flesh hath filled the earth with injustice, oppression and complainings, by [moving] the earth into the hands of a few covetous, unrighteous men, who assumes a lordship over others ... when the spreading power of wisdom and truth, fills the earth man-kinde, hee wil take off that bondage, and gives a universall liberty, and there shal be no more complainings against oppression, poverty, or injustice.<sup>14</sup>

‘True Religion, and undefiled’, as Winstanley wrote in the last month of the digging, is thus

To make restitution of the Earth, which hath been taken and held from the Common people, by the power of Conquests formerly, and so set the oppressed free. ... I affirm, [the land] was made for all; and true religion is to let every one enjoy it.<sup>15</sup>

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Winstanley is clear how the state of affairs he witnessed came about and how it will be transformed; and central to this dynamic are two theological concepts, the Fall of humankind from grace, and the Second Coming of Christ.

Winstanley is in no doubt that the earth and its fruits were originally created for all to share. ‘In the beginning of time, the great Creator Reason, made the Earth to be a common Treasury’, he writes in *A Declaration to the Powers of England* (sometimes known as *The True Levellers Standard Advanced*), the Diggers’ first ‘manifesto’. The Creator gave humankind dominion over the beasts, birds and fishes, ‘but not one

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<sup>14</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 503.

<sup>15</sup> Winstanley, *A New-yeers Gift for the Parliament and Armie* (1650), CW, II, 128.

word was spoken in the beginning, that one branch of mankind should rule over another.’<sup>16</sup>

Nor was the concept of private ownership intended by the Creator: ‘the whole Earth was common to all without exception’, with the stronger and more physically able helping the weaker by undertaking tasks on their behalf. The ‘singlenesse and simplicity’ of this arrangement became corrupted, however, once ‘the stronger, or elder brother’ realized what could be gained if they gave up working for the weaker and trying to maintain an ‘equality’ between them; and, in a rather unorthodox move, Winstanley argues that this attraction to ‘outward objects of pleasure, riches and honour for one to be above another’ constituted ‘the first step of the fall’: ‘When Mankinde began to buy and sell, then did he fall from his Innocency’.<sup>17</sup> This was then followed by the second step, the ‘outward action’ of dividing up of the land into private enclosures.<sup>18</sup> ‘The elder brother moves him to set about, to inclose parcells of the Earth into severall divisions’, Winstanley writes,

and calls those inclosures proper or peculiar to himself, and that the younger, or weaker brother should lay no claime to it, and the younger brother lets it goe so...

Winstanley’s employment of the terms ‘younger and elder brother’ reflects his conviction that the biblical narrative continues to be lived out in the ongoing struggle between the rich and powerful and the poor and weak: Cain is still murdering Abel, Esau still hankering after Jacob’s birthright, Ishmael still at odds with Isaac. Always

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<sup>16</sup> Winstanley, *A Declaration to the Powers of England* (1649), CW, II, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* (1652), CW, II, 289.

<sup>18</sup> Winstanley, *Fire in the Bush* (1650), CW, II, 215-6; cf. Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 505.

his concern is to emphasize the present application of a text rather than its historical reference, to assert his right – and that of all humble folk – to interpret Scripture as led by the Spirit in the light of their experience, and not accept the teaching of those who learn everything from books. In the case of Jacob and Esau, Winstanley sees these as types of the two powers within humankind, synonyms for the two Adams:<sup>19</sup> Esau, like Adam, is the ‘first power that appears to act and rule in every man’ and gets the birthright which, ‘by the Law of equity’ more properly belonged to Jacob.<sup>20</sup> But in the end the younger brother prevails over the older, just as the ‘first Adam’ that rules in each person is overcome by the rising of the ‘second Adam’, the power of Christ.

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If Winstanley was unconventional in arguing that oppressive behaviour constituted rather than resulted from the Fall, so his understanding of the return of Christ set him apart from orthodox teaching. While many expected Christ to appear on earth to reign in person or through his ‘elect’, Winstanley saw the Second Coming in terms of Christ ‘rising up’ in men and women and leading them to embrace that spirit of community lost since the Fall. Christ is not ‘a single man at a distance from you’, he tells his readers in *The Saints Paradise*; rather he is ‘the wisdom and power of the Father, who spirits the whole creation, dwelling and ruling King of righteousness in your very flesh.’<sup>21</sup> ‘Christ is not to be understood as separate from ‘the Saints, his body and spirituall house’, he had earlier written.<sup>22</sup> ‘Christ in his first and second coming in flesh ... is Justice and Jugment ruling in man’.<sup>23</sup> Winstanley’s

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<sup>19</sup> See for example, Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 496.

<sup>20</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 499.

<sup>21</sup> Winstanley, *The Saints Paradise*, CW, I, 372.

<sup>22</sup> Winstanley, *The Breaking of the Day of God* (1648), CW, I, 128.

<sup>23</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 527.

'immanentist' understanding of Christ enables him to equate the Second Coming with the gradual transformation of humanity.

In another unorthodox twist Winstanley sees Christ's resurrection as still a future event, and conflated with his second coming. To expect Christ to 'come in one single person' is to mistake the resurrection of Christ', he writes in *The Saints Paradice*:  
rather

you must know, that the spirit within the flesh is Jesus Christ, and you must see, feel and know from himself his own resurrection within you, if you expect life and peace by him.<sup>24</sup>

Christ 'is now rising and spreading himself in these his sons and daughters, and so rising from one to many persons, till he enlighten the whole creation'.<sup>25</sup> '[U]pon the rising up of Christ in sons and daughters, which is his second coming, the ministration of Christ in one single person is to be silent and draw back'.<sup>26</sup>

Winstanley's conviction was that society would be changed, not in the wake of a sudden return of Christ 'in person', but as men and women were transformed by Christ rising up within them. And the effect would be the restoration of true community or communism:

when [Christ] hath spread himself abroad amongst his Sons and daughters, the members of his mystical body, then this community of love and righteousness, making all to use the blessings of the earth as a common Treasurie amongst them, shal break forth again in his glory, and fil the earth,

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<sup>24</sup> Winstanley, *The Saints Paradice*, CW, I, 356.

<sup>25</sup> Winstanley, *The Saints Paradice*, CW, I, 356.

<sup>26</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 485.



and shal be no more supprest: And none shal say, this is mine, but every one shal preserve each other in love.<sup>27</sup>

Thus the inner transformation of each individual as Christ rises within them, overcoming the power of the first Adam, brings freedom from oppression in both the personal and communal sense. While

unrighteous Adam ... dammed up the water springs of universall liberty, and brought the Creation under the curse of bondage, sorrow and tears ... when the earth becomes a common treasury as it was in the beginning, and the King of righteousness comes to rule in every ones heart, then he kills the first Adam; for covetousness thereby is killed. A man shall have meat, and drinke and clothes by his labour in freedome, and what can be desired more in earth. Pride and envy likewise is killed thereby, for every one shall look upon each other as equall in Creation; every man indeed being a perfect Creation of himself.<sup>28</sup>

That Christ still remains 'buried' means that the earth has an almost sacred quality for Winstanley. Although since the Fall human beings have served to 'poyson and corrupt' it, Christ works for good within it while awaiting the opportunity to rise in his sons and daughters. 'The body of Christ is where the Father is, in the earth, purifying the earth', Winstanley writes in *Truth Lifting up his head above Scandals*.<sup>29</sup> The land is the very source and sustainer of life, our 'Mother ... that brought us all forth' and who 'as a true Mother, loves all her Children' and wants to give 'all her children suck

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<sup>27</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 527.

<sup>28</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 482.

<sup>29</sup> Winstanley, *Truth Lifting up his head*, CW, I, 421.

... that they starve not' – something she is hindered from doing all the while the land is enclosed.<sup>30</sup>

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Though aspects of Winstanley's theology were undoubtedly unorthodox, he himself was clear that his was 'no new Gospel, but the old one'. It was 'the same report that the Pen-men of Scriptures gave',<sup>31</sup> with whom he claimed to share an experimental knowledge of its truth. There are traces of Winstanley's supposed Baptist roots<sup>32</sup> in his references to the elect and rejection of eternal punishment, and his realized eschatology has distinct echoes of Familist thinking;<sup>33</sup> yet he himself acknowledges no other source for his ideas than Scripture itself: 'What I have spoken, I have not received from books, nor study' he affirms.<sup>34</sup>

Winstanley consciously distanced himself from the teaching of the established Church of his day, and not simply on account of 'doctrinal differences'. He saw the Church's teaching as oppressive for the ordinary people to whom it was preached, and for that reason rejected it wholesale. For one thing the clergy encouraged belief in a 'God beyond the Creation', which although Winstanley rejected on the grounds that such knowledge was 'beyond the line, or capacity of man to attain to while he lives in his compounded body',<sup>35</sup> he did the more so because he saw how the clergy contrived to make God appear punitive and capricious, one who approved the unfair distribution of the earth originally given as a common treasury, and 'who appointed

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<sup>30</sup> Winstanley, *A Declaration to the Powers*, CW, II, 18-19.

<sup>31</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 492.

<sup>32</sup> He speaks in *Truth Lifting up his head* of 'having gon through the ordinance of dipping': CW, I, 449.

<sup>33</sup> The Family of Love was a radical Christian movement found throughout Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>34</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 526.

<sup>35</sup> Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom*, CW, II, 343.

the people to pay Tythes to the Clergy'.<sup>36</sup> The God preached up by the clergyman behind the violent overthrow of the Diggers' community at Cobham, John Platt, taught and encouraged 'cruel deedes'.<sup>37</sup> Both God and Christ, Winstanley considered, were held by the priests 'at-a-distance' so that they could then be mediated to the people only through them.

In addition the clergy fostered 'Imagination' in their hearers to maintain their control over them. Imagination was a sense of incompleteness, fear and uncertainty, and by emphasizing an individual's sinfulness and their need to reclaim their identity by relating to the God- and Christ-at-a-distance, so the clergy made them even more dependent upon themselves. With the addition of a heaven in the next life as reward for their subservience to them, or hell as a punishment for insubordination, the system by which the clergy reinforced their authority and power over the people was, for Winstanley, complete: 'by this divined Hell after death', he wrote in *The Law of Freedom*, 'they preach to keep both King and people in aw to them, to uphold their trade of Tythes'.<sup>38</sup> The clergy persuaded the people to think

[t]hat true Freedom lay in hearing them preach, and to enjoy that Heaven, which they say, every man who beleeves their doctrine, shall enjoy after he is dead: And so tell us of a Heaven and Hell after death, which neither they nor we know what will be.<sup>39</sup>

Their message upheld the present iniquitous system and discouraged ordinary people from seeking to change it. 'O ye hear-say Preachers, deceive not the people

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<sup>36</sup> Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom*, CW, II, 309.

<sup>37</sup> Winstanley, *An Humble Request to the Minister of both Universities, and to All Lawyers in Every Inns-a-Court* (1650), CW, II, 269.

<sup>38</sup> Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom*, CW, II, 298.

<sup>39</sup> Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom*, CW, II, 298.

any longer, by telling them that this glory shal not be known and seen, til the body is laid in the dust', he appeals in *The New Law of Righteousnes*.<sup>40</sup>

In place of the clergy's alienating form of religion Winstanley stressed the immanence of God, who could be known by all without the 'aid' of the professional beneficed clergy. Humankind need not be bowed down by Imagination: 'Every single Man, Male, and Female, is a perfect Creature of himself' and has the creator dwelling in him 'to be his Teacher and Ruler within himself', he writes.<sup>41</sup> Each person can therefore judge all things by experience, which is more important than the whole edifice of doctrine and church government built up on biblical texts and drawn from 'book-learning'. Whatever else heaven and hell may be, they are *present* states: heaven is humankind, and hell describes the conditions men and women have created for themselves on earth.

Winstanley's use of the term 'Reason' for God emphasized God's immanence and contrasted sharply with that 'Imagination' from which God would redeem his sons and daughters as Christ rose in them and brought them together again into community. 'I am made to change the name from God to Reason', he wrote in *Truth Lifting up his head*, 'because I have been held under darknesse by that word as I see many people are.'<sup>42</sup> The term 'Reason' not only removed the 'otherness' which the clergy had invested in the concept of God, it emphasized that God must be known, like Christ, as spirit, indwelling and transforming the individual and leading him or her to act aright. To walk 'in the sight of Reason' is to engage in 'feeding the hungry,

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<sup>40</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 493.

<sup>41</sup> Winstanley, *A Declaration to the Powers*, CW, II, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Winstanley, *Truth Lifting up his head*, CW, I, 414.

cloathing the naked, relieving the oppressed' and other 'acts of love ...that the Creation may be upheld and kept together by the spirit of love'.<sup>43</sup>

There is no question of any antithesis between immanence and transcendence in Winstanley's theology: Reason is the Creator who made the earth a common treasury, the spirit that indwells a person, and the power by which the creation may be lifted out its bondage.<sup>44</sup>

'[T]he Spirit Reason, which I call God, the Maker and Ruler of all things, is that spirituall power, that guides all mens reasoning in right order... for the Spirit Reason, doth not preserve one creature and destroy another ... but it hath a regard to the whole creation; and knits every creature together into a onenesse; making every creature to be an upholder of his fellow, and so every one is an assistant to preserve the whole.'<sup>45</sup>

'[T]he same Spirit that made the Globe' he was later to write, 'dwells in man to govern the Globe' and 'manifests himself to be the indweller in the five Sences of Hearing, Seeing, Tasting, Smelling, Feeling'.<sup>46</sup>

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Winstanley's conviction that Christ's return would involve the transformation and perfection of the earth, that the 'kingdom' was not to be known only in a post-mortem 'heaven', places him within the millenarian tradition rooted in the Revelation of St John and associated with the 'radical' Reformers, the 12<sup>th</sup>-century abbot Joachim of Fiore and early Church figures like Tertullian, Irenaeus and Justin Martyr.

References to the denouement of history as described in Revelation, and to the

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<sup>43</sup> Winstanley, *Truth Lifting up his head*, CW, I, 418.

<sup>44</sup> Winstanley, *A Declaration to the Powers*, CW, II, 4, 10.

<sup>45</sup> Winstanley, *Truth Lifting up his head*, CW, I, 413.

<sup>46</sup> Winstanley, *A Declaration to the Powers*, CW, II, 4.

fulfilment 'here' of biblical prophecies concerning the last days, appear throughout Winstanley's writings, suggesting this hope sustained him before and during the Digging project.

Originally Winstanley linked his millenarian hopes to a 'dispensationalist' understanding of history, as suggested by the title of his 1648 publication *The Mysterie of God, Concerning the whole Creation, Mankinde, Made known to every man and Woman, after seaven Dispensations and Seasons of Time are passed over...* According to this schema, biblical prophecies concerning the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth will be fulfilled 'in length of time, by degrees', God having been pleased to provide 'dispensations or discoveries of himself ... which he will have the creature to passe through before he finish his work, to cast the Serpent, Death, and Hell, into the Lake, and before he himself appeare' to redeem humanity.<sup>47</sup> These dispensations are periods of history, each marked at their beginning and end by an event of great religious significance, and each symbolic of the progressing and deepening relationship between God and God's creation.

The first dispensation, Winstanley tells us, is marked by the introduction of the law given by God to Adam and the first man's disobedience, and the second spans the troubled years from Adam to Abraham. This latter period is characterised by 'that first promise, or manifestation of love to the Creature, and curse to the Serpent', a text Winstanley uses often: 'I will put enmity between thee and the woman [Eve], & between thy seed & her seed, he shall break thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heele' (Genesis 3.15).

The third dispensation covers the period from Abraham to Moses, having as its central theme God's promise that through the former's seed 'all nations of the earth

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<sup>47</sup> Winstanley, *The Mysterie of God, Concerning the Whole Creation, Mankinde* (1648), CW, I, 274-5.

shall be blessed' (Genesis 18.18); and the fourth stretches from Moses to Christ, a time during which 'God did more manifestly set forth his love to his creature and his wrath to the Serpent' by the institution of sacrifices as a 'type' or 'shadow' of 'Christ the Lamb, the substance of all those sacrifices'. The fifth 'is from the time that God was manifested in flesh' through the Virgin's son, to his appearance 'in the flesh and person of his Saints likewise'; this is the dispensation during which God's promise to break the Serpent's head is fulfilled and humanity is drawn to 'Jesus Christ ... the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world'. The sixth covers the time from God's appearance in the flesh of his Saints 'till the gathering up of the Elect, which is called the Resurrection Day, or the great day of Judgement.'<sup>48</sup>

Winstanley discerned himself, like all millenarians, to be living in the sixth dispensation, the penultimate phase of history, during which the elect 'are to be gathered into one City and perfected'.<sup>49</sup> But he is also assured that the seventh is not far off, when the whole creation will be 'redeemed from the bondage of death', both those who are in the 'elect' and those whom God subsequently delivers in his mercy from hell, the 'sorrows and paines that follow sin.'<sup>50</sup> In Winstanley's schema the final Judgement is a three-stage process comprising: a general resurrection; the rewarding of every person according to their deeds; and the healing of the nations or liberation of the whole creation from death and the curse.<sup>51</sup> Thus all humankind will ultimately be saved and 'the Spirit ... sent into whole man-kind',<sup>52</sup> with only the Serpent destined, as foretold, to endure the fires of hell for eternity. Hell, for

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<sup>48</sup> Winstanley, *The Myserie of God*, CW, I, 270-6.

<sup>49</sup> Winstanley, *The Myserie of God*, CW, I, 278.

<sup>50</sup> Winstanley, *The Myserie of God*, CW, I, 288.

<sup>51</sup> Winstanley, *The Myserie of God*, CW, I, 285.

<sup>52</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 484.

Winstanley, is a place from which redemption is possible through the mercy of God.<sup>53</sup>

Winstanley's later writings suggest his interest in dispensationalism waned over time,<sup>54</sup> though the apocalyptic literature of the Bible continued to provide him with a key to understanding the signs of the times. The imagery of the Beast or Serpent, representing those who oppose the work of the people of God, remained central to his thinking, and biblical prophecies concerning his ultimate defeat – in particular Genesis 3.15 – continued to reassure him that his hope was not in vain. 'And now is the coole of the day', he writes in 1650,

And the heate of opposition betweene flesh and Spirit begins to decline ...  
now the Seed begins to worke, to bruise the Serpents head, and the man  
begins to looke upward, toward the life of the Spirit within, which he sees now  
is a life above the life of Earthly objects.<sup>55</sup>

In *A Declaration from the Poor Oppressed People of England*, the Diggers' second tract from St George's Hill, Winstanley interprets the enigmatic number of the Beast '666' to argue that he is living under 'the last Tyrannical power that shall raign' before 'people shall live freely in the enjoyment of the Earth',<sup>56</sup> and in a subsequent tract he castigates the Lord of the Manor of Cobham, Parson John Platt, and other violent opponents of the Diggers, as men who 'do so powerfully act the Image of the Beast'. These men bring about, by their actions, fulfilment of the prophecy that, in the last

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<sup>53</sup> Winstanley, *The Myserie of God*, CW, I, 287-8

<sup>54</sup> Though it is important remember that *The Myserie of God* was re-issued in December 1649, both separately and in the collection *Several Pieces Gathered into One Volume* for which Winstanley wrote a special introduction. There are echoes of dispensational thinking in, for example, *The New Law of Righteousnes* (CW, I, 484) and *A Declaration to the Powers* (CW, II, 7-8).

<sup>55</sup> Winstanley, *Fire in the Bush*, CW, II, 185.

<sup>56</sup> Winstanley, *A Declaration from the Poor Oppressed People of England* (1649), CW, II, 33.



days, 'no man might buy or sell, save he had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name' (Revelation 13.17).<sup>57</sup>

In *Fire in the Bush*, Winstanley employs apocalyptic imagery from the Old Testament to identify the institutions of authority of his day with 'the foure Beasts which Daniel saw rise out of the Sea' (Daniel 7.3, etc).<sup>58</sup> These are 'Kingly power', 'selfish Lawes', 'the thieving Art of buying and selling, the Earth' and 'the Imaginary Clergy-Power', who together comprise a nexus of power to keep the poor in subjection. These each appear to flourish for a time, oppressing and burdening the creation, but upon Christ's return they will 'run into the Sea againe, and be swallowed up in those waters; that is, into Mankinde, who shall be abundantly inlightened'.<sup>59</sup> '[The] rage of the Serpent increases, because his time growes short,' he had earlier asserted.<sup>60</sup>

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Winstanley finds further pointers to the imminence of the new age in biblical allusions to a figurative period of 'a time, times, and dividing of time' during which 'the Lord he gives this Beast a toleration to rule';<sup>61</sup> references to this period, which is mentioned both in Daniel (7.25 and 12.7) and Revelation (11.2,3 and 12.14), appear in a number of Winstanley's writings. In Winstanley's day this period was generally understood to signify a period of three and a half 'years' (a year, two years and half a year), each consisting of 360 'prophetical days' or ordinary years, such that the combined period of three and a half prophetical years was equal to a total of 42 months or 1260 days (or years), the period, according to Revelation 13.5, granted to the Beast to exercise his power.

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<sup>57</sup> Winstanley, *An Humble Request*, CW, II, 270.

<sup>58</sup> Winstanley, *Fire in the Bush*, CW, II, 190-1.

<sup>59</sup> Winstanley, *Fire in the Bush*, CW, II, 192.

<sup>60</sup> Winstanley, *The Myserie of God*, CW, I, 281.

<sup>61</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 527.

This schema encouraged some of Winstanley's contemporaries to argue that the downfall of the Beast must be imminent, assuming (as most Protestants did) that he was a representation of the Pope whose rise to power could be dated to around 390-6 AD. Winstanley himself avoided setting any precise dates, though he was in no doubt that he was living in the penultimate age or dispensation and that the Diggers' work of re-making the earth a common treasury was a sign of Christ's return – 'all the prophecies of Scripture and Reason are Circled here in this Community'.<sup>62</sup> In *A New-Years Gift for the Parliament and Armie* he argues that the Diggers' work 'shall rule King of righteousness in the creation now in these later dayes, and cast out the other Serpent'.<sup>63</sup> '[T]he world is now come to the half day...' he had written a few months earlier.<sup>64</sup> While some commentators have suggested that Winstanley came to discard the religious impulses that originally inspired his action, even in his last tract *The Law of Freedom in a Platform*, published some two years after the digging project was disbanded (though possibly drafted during it), Winstanley suggests that the work of building the Commonwealth must go on lest we 'shew our Government to be gone no further but to the half day of the Beast, or to the dividing of Time, of which there must be an over-turn'.<sup>65</sup>

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There was a further reason why Winstanley rejected the God preached up by the clergy, and that was the hypocrisy of those who worshipped and followed him. Parson Platt, for example, exhorted his hearers to 'live in peace with all men, and love your enemies', yet in practice treated his enemies with anything but love: 'it is a

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<sup>62</sup> Winstanley, *A Declaration to the Powers*, CW, II, 7-8.

<sup>63</sup> Winstanley, *A New-years Gift*, CW, II, 120.

<sup>64</sup> Winstanley, *A Declaration to the Powers*, CW, II, 14.

<sup>65</sup> Winstanley, *the Law of Freedom*, CW, II, 312.

true badge of an hypocrite', Winstanley affirms, 'to say, and not to do.'<sup>66</sup> Action consistent with belief was an article of faith for Winstanley, though he was also distressed by *inaction*, as witnessed by his impatience with those who learned their theology from books but failed to live out its truth. 'The manifestation of a righteous heart shall be known, not by his words, but by his actions', he writes in *The New Law of Righteousnes*: '[T]he time is now coming on, that men shall not talk of righteousnessse, but act righteousnessse.'<sup>67</sup> '[A]s words without action are a cheat, and kills the comfort of a righteousness spirit, so words performed in action does comfort and nourish the life thereof.'<sup>68</sup>

As Winstanley tells us in his first tract from St George's Hill, his concern following his trance was to declare its message not just 'by word of mouth' and 'by writing' but 'by action in digging up the common land'.<sup>69</sup> 'My mind was not at rest, because nothing was acted', he tells us in *A Watch-Word to the City of London, and the Armie*, 'and thoughts run in me, that words and writing were all nothing, and must die, for action is the life of all, and if thou dost not act, thou dost nothing.'<sup>70</sup> For Winstanley (as for the New Testament writer James), theology must be proved by life: 'Let every Mans action be tried, and see who serves God',<sup>71</sup> he challenged his opponents.

'[T]alking of love is no love, it is acting of love in righteousnessse, which the Spirit Reason, our Father delights in', Winstanley writes, '[a]nd this is to relieve the oppressed, to let goe the prisoner, to open bags and barns that the earth may be a

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<sup>66</sup> Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom*, CW, II, 269.

<sup>67</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 508.

<sup>68</sup> Winstanley, *A New-yeers Gift*, CW, II, 108.

<sup>69</sup> Winstanley, *A Declaration to the Powers*, CW, II, 14-15.

<sup>70</sup> Winstanley, *A Watch-word to the City of London, and the Armie* (1649), CW, II, 80.

<sup>71</sup> Winstanley, *An Humble Request*, CW, II, 269.

common treasury to preserve all.’<sup>72</sup> For Winstanley, theory and practice were indivisible, and were both about the restoration of the Earth.

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<sup>72</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes*, CW, I, 516.